



Editorial: Improvisation Among the Discourses

This Special Issue of *Music and Arts in Action* (MAiA) is a collection of essays that began as talks that were delivered at the 2010 symposium, “Flirting with Uncertainty: Improvisation in Performance”, that was organized by the Sociology of the Arts Group (SocArts) at Exeter University. The event called to attention the diverse academic, stylistic, and cultural approaches to improvisation as well as its function in health, identity formation, belonging and aesthetics; that is to say, how improvisation gets into, and enables, action.

The word “improvise” comes from the Latin word “*improvisus*,” which literally translated means “not seen beforehand.” In common parlance, the word improvisation is regularly used to refer to creative decisions that are made—and acted upon—in the moment, leading many people to think of improvisation as something that performers do “off the top of their heads” without preparation. However, as ethnomusicologist Paul Berliner explains in his monumental book *Thinking in Jazz*, “the popular conception of improvisation as ‘performance without previous preparation’ is fundamentally misleading. There is, in fact, a lifetime of preparation and knowledge behind every idea that an improviser performs” (1994: 17). This is certainly true of improvising musicians, dancers, comedians, and theatre performers. It is true more generally as well, for we are all improvisers. Indeed, improvisation is a part of daily life. We improvise each time we engage in a conversation as we formulate ideas and statements in response to things that other participants in a conversation say. Walking, cycling, or driving down a street, we regularly encounter unanticipated situations to which we must respond instantaneously. Our training—both formal and informal—and our life experiences will inevitably inform our improvised responses to events and ideas which are “not seen beforehand.” Given the accelerated pace of change (e.g., artistic, technological, societal) that characterizes life in the 21st century, the ability to adapt quickly to changing situations—in other words, to improvise—is only going to become more important in the years ahead.

Creative practitioners also make improvisatory decisions when they play music, make art, write literature, create theatre, dance, teach, play sports, or engage in other creative endeavours. Improvised actions have the potential to yield genuinely compelling results—just as compelling (and sometimes more so) than if one spends a great deal of time planning in advance. This is not an excuse for a lack of preparation—far from it. If, as Louis Pasteur famously said, chance favours a prepared mind, so too does improvisation. Often, the most aesthetically engaging and rewarding

improvisations result from situations in which the participants have a deep knowledge of the field(s) within which they act, improvising within mutually (if tacitly) agreed upon parameters. Of course, those parameters vary significantly between art forms and idioms. Some improvisatory art forms, such as jazz or classical Indian music, require extensive training and the internalization of a myriad of genre-specific rules. Other idioms, including some forms of improv theatre, may have fewer explicit rules governing performance, but they too necessitate that performers work together (often with input from the audience) to define the parameters surrounding a given scene and then perform collectively within those parameters.

In addition to being a mode of performance within genre-specific parameters, improvisation can provide a trenchant means of moving *between and among* different modes of discourse, bringing them and their associated performative parameters into dialogue with one another. A risk in all modes of improvisatory discourse is the danger of relying on patterns that have become habitual or routine: pre-formulated musical patterns or “licks”, ingrained speech patterns, or worse—clichés and stereotypes. Such habits are hegemonic in the Gramscian sense of being taken for granted, but nonetheless ideologically coded. Bringing multiple modes of discourse into dialogue with one another through improvisation has the potential to disrupt and unsettle such ingrained habits and lead to artistic innovation.

Improvisation provides unique opportunities for dialogue across other forms of difference as well, as evidenced by the collection of essays in this volume. Improvisation can allow individuals from diverse social, cultural, gender, sexual, intellectual, and even linguistic backgrounds to collaborate with one another in performance, engaging in meaningful dialogue in a manner that does not minimize or erase differences, but rather explores and celebrates them. This is not to say that collaborative improvisatory acts are devoid of power dynamics; improvisations are often rife with power imbalances that are enabled by the supposed absence of rules governing improvisatory modes of performance. However, as the essays in the present volume make clear, the potential to enact modes of improvisatory interaction based on mutual respect and dialogue—rather than appropriation and oppression—is attainable and well worth striving for. Indeed, mutual respect and cross-disciplinary dialogue are at the heart of this collection, which brings together the work of scholars and creative practitioners from the fields of music, dance, and music therapy. They share a commitment to improvisation as both a mode of interaction within their respective fields and as an object of study.

Yu Wakao’s keynote address at the 2010 Exeter symposium is presented here as the article “The Modern Idea of Creativity and its Influence in Music Therapy”. Wakao critically examines some of the modern, western assumptions that underpin conceptions of creativity and improvisation within the field of music therapy, suggesting that a significant part of improvisation’s capacity to bring about change is its potential to extend beyond the individual and engage with larger societal, and even metaphysical, concerns. Carl Berstroem-Nielsen offers a typology of approaches to free improvisation in his “Keywords in Musical Free Improvisation”, which presents a number of concepts related to musical free improvisation, examining “performance-driven” and “play-driven” approaches.

In “Creating A Dialogue through Improvisation in Cross-cultural Collaborations”, Griselda Sanderson examines the role of improvisation as a conduit for intercultural collaboration and exchange, focusing on several recent projects including a longterm collaboration between herself and West African musicians living in the UK. In “Musical Improvisation and the Academy,” I critically examine some of the implications of improvisation’s growing institutional visibility within North American university curricula, as well as its growing status as an object of academic study. Music therapist Rii Numata discusses improvisation’s capacity to foster an inclusive musical and social space with specific reference to “The Otoasobi Project”, an initiative in Kobe, Japan that brings individuals with intellectual disabilities together with professional improvising musicians and music therapists. Numata examines both the aesthetic and therapeutic results of this improvisatory initiative. In “Playing with distinction? Music therapy and the affordances of improvisation,” Simon Procter begins by examining some of the reasons for improvisation’s centrality to the field of music therapy. Then, drawing on examples from his own experiences as a music therapist in a community mental health setting, he discusses some of the affordances of improvisation for music therapy, the ways in which improvisation in music therapy settings enables things to happen in the social worlds of the participants. But it is not only in musical performance and music therapy where we find improvisation. Mary Fogarty’s essay and video “Spontaneous Lux: Freestyling in Hip Hop Dance and Music” examines the complex ways that improvisation influences and takes place in hip hop dancing, focusing in particular on a Canadian b-boy crew that emphasizes freestyling.

Much like improvisation itself, this special issue of *Music and Arts in Action* is the result of a process of negotiating differences of various kinds—cultural differences, disciplinary differences, national differences, linguistic differences, and differences between lived experience and written representations of—and reflections on—lived experience. If the field of improvisation studies is to grow and develop further, it must continue to bring diverse voices such as these into dialogue with one another, for it is through cross-disciplinary, multi-vocal dialogue that new perspectives and ideas that we have “not seen beforehand” will emerge.

JESSE STEWART

ISSUE GUEST EDITOR

REFERENCES

- Berliner, Paul. (1994). *Thinking in Jazz: The Infinite Art of Improvisation*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994.
- Gladwell, Malcolm. (2005). *Blink: The Power of Thinking Without Thinking*. New York: Little, Brown and Company.

FUTURE PUBLICATIONS

MAiA's forthcoming issues in 2016 will feature articles from a range of empirical research. Forthcoming articles are detailed on our website. We continue to accept new submissions for future issues as well as proposals or inquiries for Special Issue and Thematic volumes.

THE EDITORIAL TEAM, *MUSIC AND ARTS IN ACTION*

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Music and Arts in Action would not be possible without the generous help and support of a number of individuals. The most invisible, yet most important, of these are the reviewers and copyeditors, to whom we are extremely grateful. The authors, editors and readers of MAiA have all benefited enormously from your ideas, suggestions and thoughtful comments. Last, but certainly not least, we would like to thank the authors in this issue for their hard work and creativity in producing exciting papers for us all to share.